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AUTHOR Oaks, Harold R.
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ABSTRACT

Interviews with representatives from ten foreign countries offer a base for the comparison of professionalism in children's theatre programs and indicate specific differences that exist in the United States and in each of the other countries. The United States differs from the other countries in its definition of professionalism, its lack of selectivity and specificity in theatre training, and its lack of program control and communication due to the number of schools offering undergraduate degrees in theatre. Countries that have permanent children's theatre groups include England, Yugoslavia, the German Democratic Republic, the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Switzerland, South Africa, Australia, and Japan. The majority of these countries have professional companies where the participants are selected by audition and where the repertoire is aimed at a specific audience. Many countries have permanent theatres for the children's companies; however, in Switzerland, the companies tour the schools and have no theatres. Many participants indicate a need for standards regarding script quality, the quality of production, the training of performers, government financial support, and artistic integrity. (MAI)

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PROFESSIONALISM IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES: DEFINITION, TRAINING, WORKING CONDITIONS, STANDARDS

Harold R. Oaks

A Paper presented at the Children's Theatre Association of America
(A Division of The American Theatre Association)
Convention in New Orleans, LA August 14, 1978.

This paper grows out of discussions conducted at the Sixth International Congress of ASSITEJ in Madrid, Spain, June 10-17, 1978. I personally interviewed representatives from ten countries, asking each the same series of questions to build a common base of comparison and then asking further questions where I felt it would be useful (See appendix for list of names and titles).

Definining Professional

"Professional" in the United States is used as a term to describe a person earning a living in theatre and, as an adjective, to indicate work of a particularly high quality. Those outside of the United States define "professional: as "Those who make their livelihood through their work in theatre" and/or "those who have a degree from a theatre school." There seems to be a basic assumption of quality, especially when referring to the certified graduate, for several countries require "professional" training before the person can work in the state supported theatres. As a part of his training, a student will often apprentice at a theatre, but he is not called a "professional" until the training is completed.

Theatre Training

The system of higher education in other countries tends to be more selective and specialized than in the United States. Basic education is completed in many countries by age twelve. From that point on, they begin some type of occupational training, with some selected general education on the side. Many go directly to technical schools, some to college preparatory "high schools." By age 18, most (around 75% to 80%) will be working

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in an occupation, having completed their training at approximately our Jr. college level. Very few receive advanced training. The numbers are usually controlled by examination; many students would like to go further but are not permitted to do so.

Selection of students to study theatre follows this same general pattern, with a broad based application, selection by examination, and very few selected for admission. For example, in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) in a given year 880 students took the qualifying examination for drama school (boys age 18; girls age 16). The examination included some background information, a brief "performance" and an interview. About 400 were invited back for the follow-up interview, but only 27 were actually accepted into the program. In Finland, 600 students applied for admission to one of the three drama schools and after two weeks of auditions and interviews, 16 were admitted. This number included applicants for directing and playwriting as well as acting.

The attrition rate is also high after admission, both from students becoming discouraged or disillusioned and from dismissal (Holland, Belgium, Germany and South Africa). This results in very few students being graduated and a peak demand for their talents. The Drama School in Antwerp, Belgium graduated only three students last years. This was not enough to fill demand, and talent was brought in from Holland for some company positions. Mr. Urban (East Germany) told of one young man, a 1977 graduate of one of the three Drama Schools in East Germany, who received bids from 33 theatres (both adult and children's). He then reviewed each offer and, since funding is equal for all theatres, he considered location, company reputation, extras, etc., and finally chose to work in the Theater der Freundshaft in Mr. Urban's company.

Most training programs are three to four years, with part of that time spent in practical application of training. Students will study voice, movement,

and acting, with some programs also offering mime, dance, music and cabaret. The course in Holland also includes improvisation and Creative Dramatics training, so graduates are certified to work in the schools as creative dramatics specialists. The intensive program does not include instruction outside the theatre area, (no general education) and focuses heavily on performance training. Driectors and Playwrights (and in some cases, Dramaturgs) are also trained in the Drama School.

Graduates are employed in any branch of theatre, adult or children's. In the interviews I conducted, no one mentioned specialized training for work in children's theatre. In most countries children's theatre is a "stepping stone" to more prestigious and, in many western countries, better paying positions with adult companies.

While we in the United States have some 750 to 800 schools offering undergraduate degrees in theatre, other countries have a much smaller number (East Germany, 3; Finland, 3; Holland, 3; South Africa, 2). This allows for much tighter control of programs and permits professional company managers to visit student productions to see the new talent and to use many students in shows prior to graduation. For example, the course at the Drama School at Leipzig requires two years on campus training in basic skills and two years with resident theatre companies somewhere in the country. Thus the exposure of the graduating student is much greater than if the whole time were spent on campus.

Working Conditions

After graduation, the student will be hired as a "professional" by one of the theatre companies. Specific conditions and expectations vary from country to country.

ENGLAND

Here the young actor/ess must audition for a position which will carry with it an Equity card. The 45 Equity companies forming the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre are permitted a maximum of two new Equity positions each year and the competition for these positions can be very stiff. One need not to have a Drama School degree to audition, but about 90% of those hired have degrees. There are another fifteen or so companies that are non-Equity that also do Children's Theatre; improving the quality in England includes upgrading these to full Equity status.

Since the Children's Companies are usually the first step out of Drama School, pay is at Equity minimum (Fifty Pounds per week). Company size ranges from 6 to 15 (the Young Vic is the exception at 30). All companies tour to schools, most in the region where they are based. Only about 20% have their own theatre, many are attached to regional theatres where they will also do one or two shows a year on a regular stage. All 300 professional companies do at least one production for children and young people (the Christmas Pantomime) and several do more than one.[1]

Company members will be expected to help develop the material taken to the schools, usually through improvisation. Sometimes a member of the company will act as selector/playwright, and there are some companies working with regular playwrights. The Standing Conference is attempting to secure grants for writers to work with all companies since this, they feel, will improve quality. Productions focus on Infants (K-2), Junior (3-6) and Secondary (age 12 and over).

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[1]Mr. John English, Founder of ARENA Theatre and the MIDLANDS ARTS CENTER, contrary to the trend in England, feels audiences (preferably children and their parents) should come to the theatre rather than the theatre going to them. This way they must give up something, some football or TV time, to come to the theatre like they will have to do as adults. This, he feels, is essential training for adult theatre audiences who must give time and money to attend. He feels it may sometimes be necessary to take theatre to the school, but this is the exception; not the ideal.

Touring groups do plays dealing with social problems and current issues; they dislike fairy tale material and oppose the traditional Pantomime in spite of its popularity.

The vast majority of company members use theatre for children only as a stepping stone to positions with adult companies; very few stay longer than one to two years, some as little as six months.

YUGOSLAVIA

There are ten professional Children's Theatre companies in the country; six resident theatres located in the capital city of each province, two more are in major cities and two tour the nation. All companies have their own building and play a season from September to June with three new plays added each year and a total of 250 performances per year. All plays are scripted and play to two major groups; 7-10 year olds and 11-17 year olds. Parents also often attend the theatre and plays should also interest them.

The "Bosko Buha" resident company in Belgrade has 25 actors, 4 directors, 1 Dramaturg, and other front and back of house personnel make a total of 95 full time employees. Most of the actors come from the drama school, although someone "with special talent" may come from some other training. Students may be invited to play with the resident company after the first of their four years of training. There are some auditions, but most are selected by seeing their work at the school or at a regional theatre. Pay is the same as for adult theatre. The Company is looking forward to a new theatre in 1985 with 500 seats (up from 332 now) and better stage facilities.

GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

There are five professional theatres for children and youth in the country. All have their own building but vary somewhat in focus and staff

size. Two other adult resident theatres have children and youth divisions; these are expected to become separate theatres in the next five years.

At the Centeral Children's Theatre, Theater der Freundschaft, East Berlin, there is a company of 40 actors, 20 music people, 3 directors, 2 scenery designers, 4 Dramaturgs, 3 pedagogues (one for each age level 5-7, 8-13, 14-18 years, to help in play selection), and other front and back of house personnel for a total of 200 full time employees. They have a permanent reperatory of 15 plays, with four new plays added and four dropped each year. All are scripted works, with some recent attempts at improvisation within a scripted framework.

Actors are not required to be drama school graduates but all 40 in the present company are. Selection for the company is by seeing their work at regional houses. Recent state law requires theatres, once they have hired an actor, to retain him/her to age 65 if the actor desires; they cannot be dismissed by the theatre for any reason. There is some attrition; last year 4 people left: one went to an adult company; one became ill and had to move to another climate; one went to a mime troupe and one went to a cabaret company. This retention policy is a cause of serious concern to company management and may affect quality over a period of years. Salaries are the same as for adult companies.

Actors, directors and designers are encouraged to take opportunities to work in film and television, and to accept invitations to work with adult companies on a single production basis. This allows for added compensation and artistic and intellectual stimulation for the artist, and give exposure to the theatre, since credits will include "guest artist from Theater der Freundschaft."

NETHERLANDS

Most theatres for children and youth are located along the coast in West Holland and tour the rest of the country. There are 150 to 200 people working

in the area of Theatre for children in the country (total population, 11 million). These people work in 12 "traditional" children's theatre companies; 8 Participation theatre groups; 3 "Froming Theatre" groups dealing with children's problems and with social problems; 2 Cabaret for Children companies; 8 mime/dance for children companies and 40 puppet companies.

About half of the company members are drama school trained, the rest come from amature companies into the profession. The professional association WIKOR is concerned about the quality of the work done by the companies and would like to have all trained actors over the next three to five years. Those working in mime/dance and with puppets are all professionally trained now, and quality and pay are better than in the other children's theatre forms. Children's theatre companies are poorest paid, about 20,000 guilders per year. School teachers, by comparison, are considered well paid at 35,000 guilders; mime/dance performers are paid nearly as much as teachers.

All companies tour (2-6 actors per company) to schools and do not have a base theatre. The first children's theatre building was located in Amsterdam in March 1978 by Hans Snoek and it will be workshop, theatre and information center.

BELGUIM (Flemmish section)

In the northern Flemmish speaking section of Belgium there are approximately 300 artists working in theatre. About 50 of these are in theatre for children. One company from Brussels tours plays to schools, giving a total of 250 performances a year of four plays. This group does a performance in the morning and spends the afternoon conducting small group creative dramatic sessions based on themes from the play seen in the morning.

The Koninklijk Jeugdtheater in Antwerp has a company of 25 actors playing 14 plays a year (every three weeks a new play) for a total of 200 performances

to over 100,000 children. Productions are staged on the adult theatre stage Wednesday at 3 p.m. and Saturday at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. One show a year is done in late summer in parks, etc. during vacation. Most of their work is focused on the 5 to 12 year olds, with one show per year for teenagers. They plan to do more work for teens when their new building is completed in two years; there is no space at present, since adult shows are playing evenings now. The new building will also have a large rehearsal space where participation plays can be done allowing more experimentation with new styles.

Actors must be drama school graduates to be in the company (new law passed two years ago) and the rate of pay is the same as for adult company members; but is based on the number of performances played, so the total salary is lower. Company members may and often do work in adult theatre and in television.

The company also runs a series of "school and travel" performances, totalling about 60 for elementary and 20 for secondary schools. The theatre conducts a drama competition each year and stages the winning play, along with at least 3 musicals and 2 "educational theatre" productions. About 60% of the plays are Belgian, the rest are drawn from other nationalities, both east and west of the Iron Curtain. Good new talent and scripts are the major needs; the drama schools do not graduate enough actors to fill positions.

FINLAND

Finland has 43 professional theatres. All of these do at least one or two productions for children and youth each year, and five touring companies are totally devoted to Children's Theatre. In 1977, 21% of all performances in the nation were directed to children and young people.

There are 25 actors in the five touring C.T. companies, but they are not evenly divided; one company has 12. Most plays are developed by the company

or for the company by a playwright on a special grant. Scripts are again a problem, and added grants for playwrights will help. Actors must have attended one of the three drama schools (two in Finnish, one in Swedish) and there is a shortage of graduated talent, especially men. Children's companies are seen as a step to resident adult theatres, and company members are paid at a slightly lower rate than are the Institutional company members. They stay an average of two years.

Future goals include closer cooperation with the Institutional theatres on production planning for children and youth in various parts of the country, having playwrights work with all companies, and increasing the actor's knowledge of children and their problems.

SWITZERLAND

This tri-lingual country has 6 professional Theatre for Children companies in the French section, 2 in the German section and 1 in the Italian section. My interview was with one of the two theater companies in Baden (German).

The company tours to schools; they have no theatre building. They build their own material from improvisation on a theme, using a tape recorder and notes. Two productions a year tour in a VW bus to schools; one to 7-11 year olds, the other to 12-16 year olds. A third play is staged for summer production in streets and parks, where the company "passes the hat" ("its better than tickets"). They use little or no scenery but do prepare a "teachers guide" for the plays to be used to prepare for the productions and to give follow-up suggestions. Topics tend to deal with problems or information areas; the play for the young group this year dealt with sexual role models and the teen play with working successfully with others.

The six cast members were selected by personal contact; either the director or others in the company had worked with them previously.

The Director is very careful to select those who have had previous experience as a professional (no company members are fresh out of drama school, although all have degrees) because he sees work with children as more difficult than adult theatre. They are currently playing 200 performances a year, which the director feels is too much for the company.

Pay is less than for adult companies (average is 2,000 to 3,000 franks per month while this company makes about 1500 franks per month). Some funding comes from the federal government, some from the "hat", but most from the schools where they play. This is only their third year and all teachers have seen their work now and are asking them to come back. Things look good for the future with hopes of better funding, a permanent workshop-theatre and more companies.

SOUTH AFRICA

Three provinces have full time theatre companies for children and youth. Companies have five to seven members who perform four productions per year: a scripted children's play, an improvisationally based "theatre in education" play, a secondary school level production based on Shakespeare, language, poetry, etc.; and a library program to emphasize and encourage reading. Since the country is bi-lingual the company must be able to perform in both Afrikaans and English. Pay is comparable with the adult companies and with school teachers. Here, also, Theatre for children is a step out of school to the adult theatre; company members stay two to three years, then move on.

Company members are selected by audition and most, but not all, come from drama training programs. Training tends to be academic rather than performance based, except at Capetown University, which offers a selective (60 students total) three year performance program in addition to it's academic course (200 students). Students are admitted by audition with a heavy drop out rate (25%

in the first year) and they graduate 12-15 per year. These are employed by theatre groups (60% immediately, rest within 6-8 months) both in the country and abroad (England, Australia, U.S.).

The resident adult theatres also do children and youth plays periodically.

AUSTRALIA

There are about 12 fully professional companies doing theatre for children and youth, touring to schools and playing in the institutional theatres with which they are associated. Company members are paid below teacher level but at Equity scale. If the actor is also a certified teacher, then they are paid at the higher teacher's rate. Children's theatre is regarded as a step to adult theatre. Australia is just getting communication lines open; rules and operating procedures seem to be set in local areas and are not standard for the nation yet. There is considerable work combining participation theatre and other forms; painting, dance, etc. in a festival setting.

JAPAN

There are about 80 professional troupes for children (k-9) of which 22 are puppet companies. Size of the troup varies from 5 to 150. These troupes played to about 8,000,000 children last year (out of a total of 17,000,000 in school k-9). Companies play in schools (60%), at their own base theatre (15%), at after school performances through "Parents and Children's Theatre" organization sponsored performances (10%), and the rest in other settings (15%). Theatrical works come from foreign sources (Pinocchio, Snow White, Peter Pan, etc.) including stories by Grimm, Anderson and Aesop as well as Japanese Dramas Based on folk-tales, history, biographies, etc. These are staged in both western and traditional Japanese style. Tour productions have limited scenery and costumes; productions at base theatres may be elaborately staged and costumed. There is experimentation with arena, thrust, mixed puppet/people, and other forms. Japan has established a

number of prizes for excellence in Children's and Youth theatre that appear to stimulate quality work.

Standards

Concern about the quality of work and standards was expressed by several interviewees and by several speakers at the Congress. Some are universal concerns, such as script quality. Several people asked for addresses of American publishing houses and for titles of good plays we had done. Even some theatres with resident playwrights were looking for new and/or better ideas, especially to compete with television and film.

Quality of the production work being done was a concern in several countries. The most frequently suggested solution was upgrading the abilities of the performers by requiring Drama School graduation.

Financial support was mentioned frequently as an aid in attracting better people for companies and better plays, but the more basic problem may be the attitude about Children's Theatre expressed by almost all those interviewed. Even where the government financially treats adults and children's theatre as equal, there are questions about the artistic integrity of the work done by children's companies. In many countries it is only an inferior stepping stone to adult theatre; it is not what artists work and plan to spend their lives doing. Funding will come if we are successful in changing this attitude--we pay for what we feel is worth while!

Professor Oaks is Artistic Director of the Whittlin' Whistlin' Brigade Children's Theatre Company, and Coordinator of the Child Drama Program in the Theatre and Cinematic Arts Department, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, U.S.A.

Name, Title and Address List

AUSTRALIA	
Joan Pope "Cats" Box j724 G.P.O. Perth, Australia	President of A.Y.P.A.A.
BELGIUM	
Jan Verbist Rechtestraat 28 2500 Lier, Belgium	Director, Actor
Lieve Eeckhaut Milistraat 28 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium	Dramaturg, National Jeugdtheatre
ENGLAND	
Jan Brady 349 West End Lane London NW6, England	Professional Officer of Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre
John English Midlands Arts Center Cannon Hill Birmingham, England	Founder of ARENA Theatre and MIDLAND ARTS CENTER
FINLAND	
Nena Stenius Finnish ASSITEJ Center Yrjonkatu 11 E 10 00120 Helsinki 12 Finland	General Sec. Finnish ASSITEJ; Director Penniteatteri Theatre Company
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC	
Klaus Urban 113, Berlin DDR Am Stadtpark 2/3	Director, Theater der Freundshaft
HOLLAND	
Hans Turlings Stichting Wilkor Nieuwe Uitleg 24, 2514 BR Den Haag, Netherlands	Stafmember, Foundation WIKOR
JAPAN	
Tsuneko Kawamura 4-47-11 Kugamaya Nuginamiku Tokyo, Japan	Director, Children's Theatre Performances in Tokyo
SOUTH AFRICA	
Helene Carstens Pcofs, P.O. Box 1292 Bloemfontein, South Africa	Director: Theatre for Youth
Esther Van Ryswyk Speech and Drama Department University of Cape Town Cape Town, South Africa	Director and Lecturer in theatre
SWITZERLAND	
Jean Graedel 5623 Boswil, Switzerland	Director of professional troupe; Committee of ASSITEJ
YUGOSLAVIA	
Mihailo Farkic Trg Republike 3 Belgrade, Yugoslavia	Managing Director, "Bosko Buha" theatre company